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IN THE CLAIMS:

The claims are as follows:

1. (Previously Presented) A method of operating a reservation control system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines networked to the reservation control system, comprising:
 - receiving, from a requesting computer, a reservation request for an item;
 - determining whether the item is available at a vending machine;
 - if the item is available, reserving the item to ensure availability of the item at the vending machine in satisfaction of the reservation request, wherein reserving the item comprises placing a hold on the item at the vending machine to prevent the item from being purchased by any person other than a person for whom the reservation request is made; and
 - receiving an authorized request at the vending machine to dispense the item reserved for the person for whom the reservation request was made; and
 - in response to receiving the request to dispense the item, calculating a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved.
2. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message indicating that the reservation request has been accepted, whereby the item is reserved for a future pickup.
3. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the reservation control system is a receiving vending machine.
4. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the requesting computer is a requesting vending machine.
5. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein receiving a reservation request comprises receiving an item identifier and an item location identifier.

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6. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the reservation request is received from a wireless telephone.

7. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the vending machine is connected to a network of vending machines.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein determining whether the item is available at the vending machine comprises accessing a product data structure containing a value indicative of a number of the item available at the vending machine, wherein the data structure is periodically updated with information received from the vending machine.

9. (Canceled)

10. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising, upon determining that the item has been purchased from the vending machine, removing an associated reservation request record from a reservation data structure.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein reserving the item the item comprises assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request, wherein the confirmation number is used to retrieve the item from the vending machine at future time.

13. (Original) The method of claim 12, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting to the requesting computer a message containing the confirmation number.

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14. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein reserving the item the item comprises storing an item identifier and a vending machine location identifier and assigning a confirmation number to the reservation request.
15. (Original) The method of claim 14, further comprising, if the item is available, transmitting a message containing the confirmation number.
16. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising receiving an electronic input indicative of a selection to retrieve the item at the vending machine.
- 17-19. (Canceled)
20. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising: charging the service charge to a purchaser of the item.
21. (Original). The method of claim 20, wherein the service charge increases with an increasing reservation time.
- 22-24. (Cancel)
25. (Previously Presented) A reservation system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines, comprising:
 - a memory containing a reservation program;
 - a first network interface to support a first network connection with a client computer issuing a reservation request for a vending machine item;
 - a second network interface to support a second network connection with at least one vending machine; and
 - a processor which, when configured by the reservation program:
 - determines an availability of the vending machine item at the at least one vending machine;

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if the vending machine item is available, reserves the item to ensure availability of the item in satisfaction of the reservation request, wherein reserving the item comprises placing a hold on the item to prevent the item from being purchased by any person other than a person for whom the reservation request is made; and

upon receiving an authorized request at the vending machine to dispense the item reserved for the person for whom the reservation request was made, calculates a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved.

26. (Original) The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the first network interface and the second network interface are the same.

27. (Original) The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the processor is further configured to issue a confirmation number to the client computer if the item is available.

28. (Original) The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the processor determines the availability of the vending machine item by accessing a reservation data structure contained in the memory and wherein the reservation data structure is periodically updated with information received from the vending machine.

29. (Original) The reservation system of claim 25, wherein the reservation system is a vending machine.

30-41. (Cancelled)

42. (Previously Presented) A method of operating a reservation control system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines networked to the reservation control system, comprising:

receiving, from a requesting computer, a reservation request for an item;

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determining whether the item is available at a first vending machine;
if the item is available at the first vending machine, reserving the item to ensure availability of the item in satisfaction of the reservation request, wherein reserving the item comprises placing a hold on the item to prevent the item from being purchased by any person other than a person for whom the reservation request is made;
receiving a request input to a second vending machine to dispense the item, wherein the second vending machine is different from the first vending machine; and
if the item is available at the second vending machine:
calculating a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved;
charging the calculated service charge to a purchaser of the item; and
issuing an instruction to dispense the item from the second vending machine and updating a data structure to indicate that the item has been dispensed.

43. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, further comprising:
calculating a maximum hold duration for which the item will be reserved, and after which the reservation of the item expires; and
upon detecting expiration of the maximum hold duration, charging a penalty fee to the person for whom the reservation request was made if the item had not yet been retrieved when the maximum hold duration expires.

44. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 42, further comprising:
calculating a maximum hold duration for which the item will be reserved, and after which the reservation of the item expires; and
upon detecting expiration of the maximum hold duration, charging a penalty fee to the person for whom the reservation request was made if the item had not yet been retrieved when the maximum hold duration expires.

45. (Previously Presented) A reservation system for reserving items dispensed by vending machines, comprising:

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a memory containing a reservation program;

a first network interface to support a first network connection with a client computer issuing a reservation request for a vending machine item;

a second network interface to support a second network connection with at least one vending machine; and

a processor which, when configured by the reservation program performs processing, comprising:

- upon receiving the reservation request, determining an availability of the vending machine item at the at least one vending machine;
- if the vending machine item is available, reserving the item to ensure availability of the item in satisfaction of the reservation request, wherein reserving the item comprises placing a hold on the item to prevent the item from being purchased by any person other than a person for whom the reservation request is made;
- calculating a maximum hold duration for which the item will be reserved, and after which the reservation of the item expires; and
- upon detecting expiration of the maximum hold duration, charging a penalty fee to the person for whom the reservation request was made if the item had not yet been retrieved when the maximum hold duration expires.

46. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 45, further comprising upon receiving an authorized request at the vending machine to dispense the item reserved for the person for whom the reservation request was made, calculating, by the processor, a service charge for the item according to a length of time for which the item was reserved.